

## STICKY, LIKE HONEY

An original short story by Anj Medhurst

The low, drowsy hum of a bee drifts on the breeze, rising and falling as the sun burns, bright and orange through his drooping eyelids. He can feel the familiar scratch of straw stubble on the back of his neck, the stalks bent and broken, faded yellow, anchored in the cracked soil, the sharp, sweet smell in his nostrils. He imagines the farm labourers drinking bottles of cider through barley straws after a long day baling, when it was still back-breaking manual labour. He is conscious of the weight of his limbs, the strange sensation that his arms are sinking into the earth, he can feel his veins pulsing, warm sticky blood, like honey on his fingertips.

The drone of the insect phases in and out with the sensation of his blood coursing – whoomp, whoomp, whoomp. His daughter’s sing-song voice cutting through the soothing, soporific buzz.

‘Daddy! Daddy!’

‘What you got, Pepper? Let’s see, what you showing me?’

Pepper. Her name was Frannie but she’d always been Pepper to him. His little pepper pot; pale as milk with a cloche of auburn hair and freckles the size of peppercorns. He could see her, squatting, feet firmly planted, gaze intent on the patch of dusty earth between them. Had she spotted an iridescent shield bug, or the remains of a shrew, discarded by a Barn Owl? Maybe Lady’s Mantle, or Sticklewort. Treasure of one sort or another.

He remembered Granny sharing plant lore as he held her sun-baked hand, walking up to the top field with an apple and a heel of bread wrapped in waxed-cloth, for Grandpa.

‘Stickwort; cures a musket wound, they say. I say it’s a good job we’ve got modern medicine. I don’t think many would have come back from the front if we’d relied on a bunch of weeds to do the job, eh?’

Even then, years after it had ended, the war still coloured the fields; it hung in the air, the ghosts all around them. This field would have been dotted with Italian prisoners of war, sent by the War-Ag to bring in the harvest. Bent over forks and hefting the cut grain stalks into stooks, set for loading and threshing. A lazy bunch, Grandpa said, out loud and within earshot, whenever he got the chance. They came from the camp at Botesdale in trucks every morning, bouncing up the pot-holed track to the yard, clouds of dust in their wake, dark-haired and dark-eyed to a man. Swarthy, Granny called them. Grandpa called them worse. Words you wouldn’t – couldn’t – use now but they were still the first ones he thought of; old habits die hard. They’d have refused the help if it hadn’t been such desperate times. Even with them they’d struggled to get the harvest in before the weather broke. They were terrifying; they were the enemy and Father had often told tale of how he’d lurked by the beehives, hidden from view, watching them work. That’s when he’d seen Arthur Kerridge go at one with a pitchfork. Grandpa and the other men had pulled Arthur off. They’d bandaged the ripped and bloody arm with a rag and no one had ever spoken of it. Everyone knew Arthur wasn’t quite right. That’s how come he’d not been conscripted. Not quite right.

The bloody bee swooshes its way back into his head, louder now, the buzz insistent, uncomfortable. Fingers stickier, dripping. What is Pepper trying to show him? She loved to share her treasures, to invite people into her micro-world. She tagged along with the WOOFers who passed through every summer. Poles, Lithuanians, a few Romanians. They’d stay in the

caravans at the bottom of the yard, cook on the gas barbecue and drink cheap beer on a Friday evening. He'd hear them laughing late into the night, the smoke from their cigarettes mingling with the smell of summer. They cut asparagus in April, turned the hay in May, managed the 'pick your own' field in June and shifted load after load of grain at harvest time. Only a handful had come this year and who could blame them. He tried not to take it personally, but he'd been run ragged. You don't realise what you've got until it's gone. Too late now – no use crying over spilt milk.

This time of year, as the fields bared their souls, they each clung to the sweet summer evenings. Emma and the children traipsed across the bottom meadow and up the side lane as evening started its descent, with bags and bottles and blankets, and they ate potato salad and cold sausages, drank cider or apple juice. Pepper and Eddie wandered off, eyes scanning the ground for flint axe heads, searching the hedge for hazel switches for bows; as thick as your thumb, that was the rule. Will, awkwardly straddling the gap between childhood and adolescence, sat with them, cross-legged, nose in his book as usual. They swatted flies, ate dust when the breeze picked up, shared punnets of raspberries. He tickled Emma's foot with a long blade of grass and she flinched, brushing it away, sighing and closing her eyes against the dipping sun.

That same sun burns through his eyelids now, imprinting fractal jigsaws of yellow light, celluloid combusting, a kaleidoscope, zig-zagging across the screen. He can still feel his arms, weighted down by the air, heavy as sacks of grain. His fingertips twitch, tingling as the blood reaches them. Sticky, like honey. The tinnitus buzz in his head is getting louder, rising and falling with his chest; rasping and thrumming in his throat. The steady, rhythmic beat of a drum, or a

heart. He can't hear Pepper now and he squints against the glare; sees her crouching, holding a rough, work-worn hand. His hand.

Some half hour earlier, Emma had called up to the boys,

'Will? Keep an eye on Eddie for me, love. Just popping up to the top field to see what's keeping your dad. Pep's coming with me, OK? Will? Can you hear me?'

She waited at the bottom of the stairs for Will's grunted response.

'Come on Pepper, let's go find Dad, shall we? Shoving her phone into the pocket of her apron, she jammed her feet into the boots that stood on the front step. Pepper was already skipping across the yard, binoculars slung around her neck. She rarely left the house without them, still collecting treasure everywhere she went. A glimpse of a fox in the field margin, a chance to watch a buzzard ride the thermals. Emma stopped to latch the gate, checked her phone again, still no signal. Bloody mobiles; now they relied on them they never bloody worked when you needed them to. They'd managed just fine without them until a few years ago. No idea what he was doing, where he was, no way of knowing when he'd be back down for his dinner, until she heard his boots scrape across the mat and his keys drop on the sideboard.

'Pep! Wait up!' she called to her daughter, already half way up the track and Pepper flicked a glance back over her shoulder and paused, dropping automatically to a squat and rooting around at the base of the hedgerow.

'Look mum, look what I found.' Pep is holding something aloft. A tiny feather, catching the light, flashing brilliant blue; a jay feather. There were lots of jays on the land this year, and magpies, rooks, crows, jackdaws. All the noisy, rambunctious corvids. Pests, bullies, scavengers,

the lot of them but she couldn't be doing with farmers who trapped them, shot them, strung their carcasses along barbed wire fences, parading them like trophies, portents of doom. Pepper had told her a while ago that jays were almost hunted to extinction in the nineteenth century, their tiny azure feathers prized by milliners. Now they were prolific and she loved to see the flashes of pinky-blue, the white rump as they swooped down from the trees to squint at the ground, collecting acorns from beneath the big oak.

The fields have barely changed in a century or more, still bounded by the same blackthorn, geulder rose and hazel, their margins home to ground nesting birds and field mice. But they've noticed the songbirds decline in recent years and the wildflowers are not as abundant or diverse. In spring, they seek out orchids, and the elusive pasqueflower and even though it's the wrong time of year, she automatically scours the ground around her, looking for the distinctive purple bloom. Vanishingly rare these days, they are always hopeful they might spot the plant they know grew here in his grandparents' day. Wind flower, meadow anemone; said to grow on sites of ancient burials, the resting places of Romans and Vikings; created from drops of Adonis' blood after he was gored by a wild boar; the bell-shaped flowers shelter for fairy folk. All around them the land is steeped in myth and lore, layer after layer fading away beneath their feet. She liked to imagine the stories as she walked the fields and byways, the foundations for everything they did.

As they turn into the top field, they can see the tractor on the far side. Hear the faint thrum of an engine. It is stationary, the trailer half loaded with straw bales, the loader standing idle beside it, a bale impaled on its lofted forks. Pepper is skipping ahead again, lifting the binoculars to her eyes, adjusting the focus.

“Mum! Mum!” she shouts, starting to run. ‘Dad’s on the ground, in front of the tractor...’ her voice is carried away on the breeze as she picks up speed, galloping now, towards the quiet, still outline of her father.

‘Wait, wait Pepper, please... wait for me.’ She is fumbling her phone from her pocket as she too starts to jog. Thankfully, this high up, away from the house, there is a skeletal signal. She dials 999, as she stumbles across the stubble. She can see now that he is lying awkwardly, not crouched with spanner or wrench – bloody ancient farm machinery, always breaking down mid-lift or halfway up a furrow. No, he is prone, still, wedged beneath the huge front wheel of the loader, engine running.

The person who takes her call is calm. Emma can barely hear her own voice, the blood is rushing through her veins, vibrating in her ears, distorting the voice as it seeks to clarify,

‘No vehicle access – none?’

‘It’s a field, it’s a farm, no, there’s no road within half a mile.’ She is panting, as she gets closer to him, she can’t catch her breath.

Pep is squatting, holding his hand, stroking it gently. ‘Daddy! Daddy!’ Her voice high-pitched, confused.

‘Ok. The first responders are on their way. The air ambulance has been requested. Stay on the line if you can.’

‘I’ll try, the signal, it goes, it might go...’

The whooshing, pulsing sensation of the blood rushing around her body heightens as she sees the blood; oily, dark blood, on the ground, on him, on Pep’s hands, she has wiped it across her forehead.

Emma bends, and strokes his brow, shields his face from the dipping sun.

'What... how, how long, what happened, we're here, we're here, they're coming.' As the words tumble out, she can hear the voice of the dispatcher and realises that she still has the mobile phone clamped to her ear.

'Yes, yes. He's breathing, his eyes are open. He's bleeding... I don't know, I don't know how bad it is.' She keeps talking; to him, to Pep, to the voice on the other end of the phone? She is not sure.

'What happened, what were you doing?' she can't imagine how he has ended up like this. Except she can. When you work the fields on your own, with decrepit machinery, anything can happen. Lulled into a false sense of security, distracted by tiredness, by a stray thought, by anything.

He looks at her and tries to lift his head, squinting to see Pep.

'Pep... Em...' His voice fades, his eyes close.

As they wait, she murmurs softly, cradling his head; Pep strokes his hand. The insects buzz, the corvids rasping calls reverberate, and eventually they hear the distant sound of helicopter blades rotating; whoomp, whoomp, whoomp, and they feel the blood on their fingers, sticky like honey.

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